

Accession Number: 1

Classification: Black Community

Date: April 30, 1974

Place: Evanston, Illinois

Interview with: John Pressley

Interviewed by: Glenna Johnson and Thandie Mvusi

Language used: English

Observations: This interview was conducted in Mr. Pressley's home. Mr. Pressley is a retired Northwestern employee whose son graduated from Northwestern with a PhD in African History. Thus he was immediately in sympathy with our interests. He had no first hand information regarding domestic labor but was able to provide us with significant information nonetheless.

1. Q: Where were you born?

A: I was born in Evanston.

2. Q: When did you start working at Northwestern?

A: 1936.

3. Q: When did you retire?

A: July 31, 1972.

4. Q: What did you do at Northwestern?

A: I worked in the Geology and Geography Departments preparing geological specimens for study under the microscope.

5. Q: Could you describe the training you received for this job?

A: I picked up a little here from the professors and a little there from the graduate students.

6. Q: Were you essentially self-taught then?

A: Yes, that's right.

7. Q: Do you remember the first war?

A: Oh yes.

8. Q: Did you serve?

A: No. I missed both wars.

9. Q: How did you survive during WWI, that is, how did you earn a living?

A: During World War I Evanston was not an industrial town. It had one factory here, the Clayton Mark Factory. They told the

(Cont. 1/ii)

9. colored people if they had relatives to send them up because they were short. That's when the big immigration began in 1916.

10.Q: Who is "they". Do you mean did the agents of the factory recruit in the South?

A: No, blacks working for Marks told relatives to come up from the South.

11.Q: Did many blacks come up then?

A: Yes.

12.Q: Did you work for the factory?

A: No. Do you know Ebenezer Church? Well, that was the first Colored church in Evanston. It was built in 1908. It's built in the shape of the cross but it wasn't always that way. It used to be only the front section facing Emerson Street but so many colored people came up from the South that they had to expand it between 1918 and 1920 to handle the influx of people. That's how it got it's present shape of the cross.

13.Q: Who held most of the jobs at the factory?

A: The factory was at Dodge and Dempster. Most of the employees were Polish.

14. Q: What did the factory produce?

A: Pipes.

15.Q: Blacks who came in domestic service--where did they settle?

A: Those who had no families lived in the homes of the white people they worked for. Those who had families couldn't live in. They bought homes west of the canals.

16.Q: Where did blacks get capital to buy houses?

A: They worked for it and saved their money.

17.Q: Are there enclaves of the black community or is there a single community?

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Q. Where did blacks get capital to buy houses?

A. They worked for it and saved their money.

Q. Are there enclaves of the black community or is there a

17. A: There is a black community.

18. Q: Has the settlement pattern changed over the years?

A: Oh yes. When the blacks moved in the whites moved out. The first black family to live in this block was Dr. Sharkley's (sp?) In 1954 the Supreme Court threw out the covenants on property. This neighborhood began to change. This area was a circus field when I was a child. It was subdivided for housing in 1934. The land was owned by florists who willed that it not be used to house colored people but the Supreme Court threw that out.

19. Q: Did you know anyone who was a domestic laborer?

A: Oh yes. Mr. White was the butler for Mr. Schaeffer who owned the Saturday Evening Post. When he died his home went to the Northwestern University Traffic Institute.

20. Q: Did the Daws employ blacks?

A: Rufus Dawes had all colored help, but the Vice President-- he didn't employ coloreds.

21. Q: Can you tell me about black professionals? Did blacks work in banks for example?

A: (emphatic) There were black lawyers, doctors, and clergy and they served black and white alike. Do you know about the Evanston Community Hospital?

22. Q: Just that it exists, basically. And about Dr. Hill.

A: Well, you see now, Dr. Hill, she was my doctor. She was born here. She knows the town like a book. Oh about fifty years ago there was only the Evanston Hospital and the St. Francis Hospital. They're still here. Much larger institutions now than they were in those days. But a Evanston hospital didn't

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(Cont. 11v)

22. A: want to treat blacks, and if they could keep from it, they wouldn't. Now St. Francis was a little more lenient but they didn't want to treat blacks either if they could help it. So Dr. Butler and his wife, who was a physician too, they organized what was known as the Butler Sanitarium up at 1918 Asbury.

23. Q. And this was a facility for black people?

A. That's right. And of course Dr. Butler and his wife and Dr. Garnett set it up. And from those humble beginnings was the first hospital for blacks in Evanston--now Community Hospital.

24. Q. When was this?

A: I'd say about fifty-five years ago.

25. Q: Does Community Hospital still serve primarily black people?

A: They serve anybody. But all the black physicians practice there. Whereas at Evanston Hospital they can now, but they didn't used to be able to. I don't know of any who practice there even now.

It's too bad we have to have wars, but these wars, well--they certainly have helped conditions for black people a great deal. Look at Northwestern. I can remember a time when I wouldn't see a black face on the campus for a week at a time. There's plenty of tthem there now. It's because of the government contracts or one thing or another they had to come up to some requirements and pay attention to minority groups.

26. Q: We read in a newspaper article where a Mr. Foster was planning to build a hospital for black people where they could study medicine and care for theirown people. Did that ever materialize?

(Cont. 1/v)

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Q. We read in a newspaper article where Dr. Fisher was planning to build a hospital for black people where they could study medicine and care for their own people. Did that ever

26. A: Not to my knowledge. Now Clyde Foster who was manager of Quinlan and Tyson was connected with Community Hospital.

27. Q: Do you remember when there were marshes between Chicago and Ridge? People have told us there were marshes there once and children had to ride in rafts to and from school?

A: Well, that's before mytime. But I've heard that at one time the lake extended almost as far as Ridge Avenue but that was before my time too. On Ridge Avenue there used to be one huge mansion and that was owned by James A. Patten, the wheat king. There's an iron fence around that block now. It extends down Ridge Avenue from Lake Street to Greenwood to Ridge to Asbury. He was mayor of Evanston at one time and he funded Patten gym.

28. Q: Is his family still in the area?

A: I don't know.

29. Q: What did your father do?

A: My dad? He was a janitor at Northwestern University. He started in 1912. No--no, wait a minute. He died in 1912. He started in 1900.

30. Q: Did your mother work?

A: Oh...at home.

31. Q: How did you get around? Was ther public transportation? Did you walk?

A: These two feet. Back in those days the only public transportation you had was down the same route you have now on the #1 Bus Line. It runs down Sherman Avenue to Central.

(Cont. 1/vi)

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the 51 Bus Line. It runs down Sherman Avenue to Central.

(Cont. 1/v1)

32. Q: Was that the trolley?

A: Yes, that was the trolley. Then later on we got the bus system.

33. Q: When did you get the buses?

A: Oh, that's been too long for me to say exactly. I'd guess it must have been during the forties.

34. Q: Where did black children go to school, or were they allowed to go to school?

A: Did they go? Of course they went. The first school I went to was Haven. Of course, then, Haven was located where Marshall Fields is now. Church Street and Sherman Avenue.

35. Q: Where did you live then?

A: 906 Emerson Street. Right next door to the elevator track. It was Northwestern property.

36. Q: Did you live there because your father was working for Northwestern?

A: Yes.

37. Q: May I ask you a hypothetical question? Had your father not been working for Northwestern, where might you have lived?

A: I didn't understand you.

38. Q: Where else might you have lived if your father did not work for Northwestern?

A: Down in the 1500 block of Elmwood Avenue. There was a little colored settlement there. We might have lived there. That's where the police station is now. Around Elmwood and Grave.

Right where the police station is now. In fact when the city

(Cont. 1/vii)

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38. A: moved the police station there they bought that property from colored folks. Then, you know where the Haven School is now, up at Lincoln Street and Green Bay Road...that property was bought from colored folks and along Prairie Avenue. Now, you know where Wieboldts is now. Across the street where the parking lot is now there was a little colored settlement in there.

Across from the store is the Mount Zion Church, a colored church.

39. Q: Then there were little groups of colored people with white around them?

A: White people were around but then there was this little center of colored folks.

40. Q: Was it ever mixed within the little community or was it always solid groups of white and solid groups of black?

A: Oh no, it was mixed some within. (This answer is hazy on tape and was unverifiable in notes.) The other big Baptist Church is on Benson Avenue just across the alley from Marshall Fields.

41. Q: How do you account for these little settlements? Often blacks are allowed to settle only where nobody else wants to settle. Is it that Evanstonians didn't want the areas where blacks settled?

A: That's right.

42. Q: How were the zoning changes to permit commercial activity in a residential neighborhood handled?

A: It was done a little bit at a time. Wieboldts wanted to expand and they couldn't build up on their original site and

42. A: moving outwards was expensive so they bought up property from the colored people.

43. Q: At this time was this an entirely residential area or was it mixed residential and commercial?

A: It was mixed residential with some commercial, not much.

44. Q: Do you know if it was originally residential and commerce moved in or was it commercial and residential moved in?

A: Kind of both.

45. Q: I'm wondering how the city was handling the zoning of this area. Were black families being pushed out by the city in order to rezone this area for commercial purposes?

A: Well, yes, that's part of it.

46. Q: Can you explain what impact Wieboldts or Marshall Fields moving in the area had on the community?

A: When Wieboldts moved in and bought that property they paid a good price. They weren't gypped out of anything. One fellow, he got \$65,000.000 for his property. In those days that was a lot of money.

47. Q: How was it handled? Were black people involved in the decision to allow commercial activities move into the area or was this something the city said, "We're putting commercial institutions in here and you can just sell." Do you know what I mean?

A: Yes, but I can't answer that question. I do know that most families received a good price for their property.

48. Q: I have a picture of little enclaves of black people in

1. The first step in the process of identifying and classifying information is to determine the sensitivity of the information.

2. The second step is to determine the scope of the information, including the geographic area and the time period covered.

3. The third step is to determine the nature of the information, including the type of information and the source of the information.

4. The fourth step is to determine the impact of the information, including the potential for harm and the need for protection.

5. The fifth step is to determine the classification of the information, based on the results of the previous steps.

6. The sixth step is to determine the handling of the information, including the storage, transmission, and disposal of the information.

7. The seventh step is to determine the review of the information, including the periodic review of the classification and the handling of the information.

8. The eighth step is to determine the declassification of the information, including the removal of the classification and the handling of the information.

9. The ninth step is to determine the destruction of the information, including the removal of the information and the handling of the information.

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13. The thirteenth step is to determine the transfer of the information, including the removal of the information and the handling of the information.

14. The fourteenth step is to determine the destruction of the information, including the removal of the information and the handling of the information.

48. Q: the city. Were these little settlements established along major transportation routes or just where blacks could find housing?

A: Some blacks had horses and buggies.

49. Q: I'm curious, what kind of horse and buggies did blacks have?

A: Oh, they weren't high grade horses, but nonetheless they served the purpose. People were located both along transportation and where they could find a house. People thought nothing of walking in those days. When I was a kid I used to walk from around here (near Dodge) clear to Ebenezer (Emerson) and think nothing of it. The pavement stopped at Dodge Avenue and from there on to the canal.

50. Q: Were there dirt roads or no roads?

A: Sure. Dirt roads. You walked in the mud when it rained.

51. Q: I'm trying to pretend I was alive in 1910 and suppose I lived where Wieboldts parking lot is now. Where would I work if I was a young woman, say 25 with two kids, and what would I do with my children, where would they go to school and how would we get around?

A: Well, yes, there was different types of work. There weren't too good a jobs but there was work. There was janitor work, porter work, post office--mostly custodial work but we did have a few mail carriers, but there were no colored clerks in Evanston.

52. Q: That must have been a prestigious job?

A: Oh yes! Then we had two men on the police force. We didn't have any firemen.

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53. Q: At what time was this, what year?

A: I'm going back now as far as I can remember. That's about 65 years.

54. Q: Well, you've told me what my husband would have done. What about me, and how would we have gotten to work?

A: You would have walked there.

55. Q: What kind of job could she have?

A: She would have been a domestic.

56. Q: Do you have any idea what she would have been paid relative to the economy at that time?

A: My father got \$50.00 a month, 9 hours a day, six days a week. He got two weeks paid vacation. The university was small in those days and dad had a cart. He was a janitor and he would put the diplomas in the cart and he would roll the cart up to Patten gym and he would hand the diplomas to President Harris in those days, that's where Harris Hall got its name and my father would hand the diplomas to President Harris and he would hand them to the students. That's how small Northwestern University was. President Harris' office used to be on the second floor of University Hall in the southeast corner of the building.

57. Q: Do you have any idea what the female domestics did?

A: Yes; now the female domestics were limited to work in the homes and either lived in or did day work such as laundry and washing windows. Day work brought \$2.00 per day, but then

(Cont. 1/xi)

57. A: \$2.00 would buy all the groceries you could carry.

58. Q: So then a woman who had a family would end up doing day work such as laundry and washing windows, etc?

A: That's right. Of course in those days we had what you called hod carriers. The colored men carried mortar or plaster on a stick and carried it up and down a ladder.

59. Q: If I didn't have a family where would I live?

A: Most lived in with the family they worked for.

60. Q: Do you know of any people who lived in?

A: Oh yes. Conditions were quite liveable. I know some people who were able to buy a house to retire in from their savings in domestic work. You had the same heat and the same food. In domestic work there used to be a time if you were a cook or a maid where you could be off every other Sunday after dinner and every other Sunday after breakfast. They also used to have off every other Thursday after lunch and every other Thursday after dinner. They never got a complete day off. Now days domestics are down pretty much to a five day week. They don't work Sunday's at all and many of them don't work Thursdays either.

61. Q: Was it a rule that live-ins could not have their own families?

A: Well, it just wasn't convenient.

62. Q: If I were a live-in domestic and I found a man, would he move or would I lose my job?

(Cont. 1/xii)

Q. Now, you say that the man who was with you at the time of the shooting was a man who was with you at the time of the shooting.

A. That's right. Of course in those days we had what you called card carriers. The colored man carried money or played

at a stick and carried it up and down a ladder.

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man in a white house you could be all every other Sunday

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62. A: Well, it depended on the family. If you were important enough to the family they might have tried to find a place for the young man. It was an individual thing.

63. Q: Were domestics allowed to marry?

A: Oh yes. Of course they were.

64. Q: We asked this question because during this same time in England live-in domestics were not allowed to marry.

A: Oh there was nothing like that here.

65. Q: The Aunt Jemima image we all have of the colored lady who takes care of the white woman's children all day, and cooks for the white family all day, and is too tired and worn out to care for her own family even when she does have time...is this picture real or a lie?

A: Most of it is a lie. You do run into some cases, however; we had one lady here in church who passed away. She was sick before she died. She had worked for this family for years. The master brought her to the hospital and said he would like to care for her but couldn't afford to. They went home and went through her things and found that she had saved \$10,000.00. He immediately came back to the hospital and told them to give her the best care possible, to spare no expense. When she died they used the money to bury her and the rest reverted to the state of Ohio because she had left no will.

66. Q: What happened to domestics when they got too old to work? Were they just turned out or did the masters support them?

A: Well, again, that is an individual thing. Some people were very nice to them. Others just didn't do anything.

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66. A: Most were placed in a convalescent home when they became too old to work.

67. Q: And the master paid this cost? Or was it taken out of their savings?

A: If they had savings they paid for it themselves but the masters were generally good to them if they couldn't take care of themselves.

68. Q: Do you think domestics will talk to us about their experiences in white peoples' homes as servants?

A: Well, I expect so, but then they don't talk much. It's a matter of pride now that other jobs are available.

69. Q: Was there duality of consciousness in doing domestic work-- not wanting to be in service yet having to do whatever work was available in order to survive?

A: Yes they do. Sure. Sure. I remember this one old woman who worked all her life in domestic service to put her son through college, and when graduation came he lied to her and didn't even tell her when it was.

70. Q: Would you be willing to see us again?

A: Oh yes, yes.

End of session.

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